

Reel Life: faulty films from San Francisco

One way to summarize the history of American cinema since 1960 is this: while the avant-garde labors to transform the mundane into the extraordinary, Hollywood effortlessly makes the extraordinary mundane. The second half of this statement should be clear to even the most occasional moviegoer. Does anyone want to see another incredibly expensive car chase, another supernatural phenomenon, another alien being from outer space? Probably the answer is a resounding yes, but it's hard to imagine why. The industry, putting an increasing number of dollars into a decreasing number of films, has been preoccupied with visualizing the inconceivable, with the result that hardly anything is left to the imagination.

The avant-garde, meanwhile, with more limited financial means, has tended to focus on the objects and events of everyday life. Stan Brakhage's **The Text of Light**, an abstract film at once ephemeral and precise, beautiful and austere, was made by filming light refracted through an ashtray. In dozens of other films, his subject matter has been that of home movies - his daily life and that of his family. Some critics see Brakhage's preoccupation with himself and his surroundings as an extension of the Romantic sensibility. Others see it as narcissism. Few would deny that Brakhage's sensitivity to the conditions of his medium and to the subtleties of the visual world elevate his subject matter far above its roots in daily life. Other filmmakers who do not share Brakhage's diaristic tendencies have made important films of inconsequential subjects. Ernie Gehr's **Serene Velocity** is a film so visually powerful that it seems to explode the boundaries of the screen; its "subject" is a deserted hallway in an institutional building.

The problem of how to transform the personal into the universal has been a crucial one for the avant-garde. Brakhage has tended to mythologize his subject matter. Others, like Hollis Frampton (in **nostalgia**), for example) use formal conceits and irony. Owen Land (AKA George Landow) has rejected the whole idea of personal filmmaking, or rather, he has inverted its basic principle - instead of a self-conscious filmmaker, he proposes a self-conscious audience.

"This is a film about you," he warns in **Institutional Quality**, "not about its maker."

Ultimately, it is a problem of scale. Tragedy is nothing but melodrama on a grand scale; the personal, greatly magnified, becomes universal. Whether through mythopoeia or irony, avant-garde filmmakers have tended to magnify the ordinary until it became extraordinary.

The above introduction is by way of explaining the failure of Chicago Filmmakers' program of films from San Francisco. The filmmakers have failed to grasp the mechanics of the manipulation of scale. Choosing, for the most part, mundane subjects, they have produced mundane films.

It is hard to imagine that any of the filmmakers ever considered the possibility that their films might be seen by an audience. Given the always small, and constantly waning, audience for avant-garde films, this is perhaps not surprising. What is surprising, and disappointing, is that these films were selected as representative of the last three years of San Francisco filmmaking.

The films were selected by Dominic Angerame, manager of San Francisco's Canyon Cinema Cooperative. He has included two of his own. They are among the most solipsistic works on the program; they seem to have been made with the implicit assumption that the filmmaker's life would be a subject of endless interest to his audience. This is not the case. **I'd Rather Be in Paris**, the longer of the two, almost seems a deliberate exercise in boredom. Shots of the filmmaker's editing table, his girl friend, himself filming, the view from his apartment unreel in endless succession. My only hope for the filmmakers of San Francisco is that Angerame's selection of films was as myopic as his selection of images for his own films.

David Gerstein's **Ambivalence** is better edited, in terms of both sound and image. He seems to be influenced in his editing by the theory of intervals propounded by Soviet filmmaker Dziga Vertov, in which a group of images is intercut over a period of time to suggest a complex series of interrelationships. The content of his images, however, is so neutral

that this essentially analytic editing process seems pointless.

Almost every film in the show suffers from the same problem. There is hardly an image here that have not seen before. Time-lapse sequences of clouds passing overhead, buildings being demolished (Michael Wallin's **Monitoring the Unstable Earth**); pixilated dancers clad in underwear and toilet paper (**Vespuciland**, by Rock Ross); lists of words unconnected by grammatical sequence (Dean Snider's **This Is No Picture**); self-conscious monologues addressed directly to the camera (Toney Merrit's **Conquest Piece**). It is all painfully familiar. Which is not to suggest that any of these things could not, conceivably, be interesting. Just that they're not, here. If film was food, these would be stale leftovers.

I am very partial to the tradition, and the potential, of the American avant-garde film. In a review a few months back of a show from Pittsburgh, I probably let my sympathies sway my judgment - although that show still seems to me far better than this one. This program of films supports all of the most cogent criticisms of the avant-garde tradition - solipsism, gratuitous formalism, aesthetic inbreeding - without revealing any of its strengths.

There is, happily, one exception. The best film of the evening (which isn't saying much) and a good film (which is) is Wendy Blair's **Les Ondes**. Significantly, it is also the closest to abstraction. Reflections in water, zigzag strands of light, and clouds of smoke are rendered in high-contrast black and white. Reflections on water are no less a filmic cliché than any of the items I mentioned earlier, but they are redeemed here by a sensitivity to qualities of light and composition. **Les Ondes** generates from its limited subject matter an emotional resonance that is absent from any other film in the program. This is the biggest strength of the avant-garde - its potential to make something out of nothing.

The San Francisco films will be shown at 8 PM Saturday at Chicago Filmmakers, 6 W. Hubbard, 329-0854. \$3.

- Harvey Nosowitz

FRONTAL EXPOSURE

FRONTAL EXPOSURE GOES ON hiatus for the next few months — so don't miss the weekly specials for June (Saturdays at 10:00 pm on Channel 32). They include Louis Sremac's hand-painted animated film *The Young Fisherman* (the 6th); five poetic and provoking works by videographer Richard Alpert — *Post Time*, *Opacity of Order*, *Fracture*, *Video Self-Portrait*, and *Shibboleth* (13th); Chris Felver's *Archive of the Living Culture: San Francisco Poets*, the first installment of a long-term project on Bay Area poets, featuring Neeli Cherkovski, Harold Norse, Kaye McDonough, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, James Broughton and others; and highlights from the 1981 San Francisco Art Institute Film Festival, including Lambert Yam's impressionistic view of cable cars in *On the Track*; Doug Haynes's cutout animation *Common Loss*; an abstract analogy of life's fragility in *Monitoring the Unstable Earth* by Michael Wallin; and a look at middle America's secret sexual fetishes in *Ritual* by Andy Anderson (27th). ■

Saturday the 27th

Channel 9

- 8:00 am MISTER ROGERS' NEIGHBORHOOD (R)**
- 8:30 SESAME STREET** Two programs. (R) (CC)
- 10:30 VIC BRADEN'S TENNIS FOR THE FUTURE**
Playing Doubles (R) (CC)
- 11:00 GARDENING FROM THE GROUND UP** *Love Your Plants* (R)
- 11:30 THE NEW VOICE Prom** (Final episode). Millie discovers article she wrote on consumerism is affecting her attitudes about prom & costs involved in attending. (R)

FOCUS

- 12:00 noon PRESENTE!** *Del Mero Corazon*. Sampling of ballads & love songs that make up Texas-Mexican Norteño musical tradition.
- 12:30 pm EXPLORING LANGUAGE** *The State of English* (R)
- 1:00 SYSTEMS MANAGEMENT** *Scott-Bader Ltd.* (R)
- 1:30 FIRING LINE SPECIAL** with William F. Buckley, Jr.
- 2:30 MARK RUSSELL COMEDY SPECIAL** (R)
- 3:00 THE ROAD BACK: THE STORY OF JAMES J. BEATTIE** (R)
- 4:00 INTERNATIONAL SOCCER**
- 5:00 FREE TO CHOOSE** *The Tyranny of Control*. How should government protect domestic industries from foreign competition? (CC)
- 6:00 GARDENING FROM THE GROUND UP** *Indoor Operations*. Care of houseplants.
- 6:30 TOMORROW/TODAY** Computer-aided manufacturing, biofeedback, automation & productivity. "Last Word" commentary by Dr. Willis Harman, futurist with SRI International.
- 7:00 NOVA** *Beyond the Milky Way* (R) (CC)
- 8:00 THE CHRISTIANS** *Missions Abroad*. Bamber Gascoigne recounts beginning of missionaries.
- 8:55 ART NOTES** *Maynard Dixon — Illustrator of the Old West* (R)
- 9:00 THE AMERICAN SHORT STORY** *Bernice Bobs Her Hair* by F. Scott Fitzgerald. Pre-flapper era story of reticent "ugly duckling" who becomes sought-after vamp. *I'm A Fool* by Sherwood Anderson. Story of young man's discovery of romance on Ohio racetrack circuit in early 1900s.
- 10:30 THE FALL & RISE OF REGINALD PERIN II** Slow trickle of visitors to Reggie's community increases with astonishing results.
- 11:00 VIDEOWEST** *Science Fiction — Image & Imagination*. The world of speculative fiction. Special profile of Ray Bradbury. *Simulcast on KTIM-FM 100.9*.
- 11:30 MYSTERY!** *Rumpole of the Bailey*. "Rumpole & the Heavy Brigade." (R) (CC)

Channel 32

- 6:00 pm SESAME STREET** (R) (CC)
- 7:00 KATHY'S KITCHEN** *Loafing*
- 7:30 SACRAMENTO WEEK IN REVIEW** (R)
- 8:00 DIVINE DRUMBEATS: KATHERINE DUNHAM & HER PEOPLE** *Great Performances*. Tribute to world-reknowned dancer/choreographer whose work was strongly influenced by Haitian culture.
- 9:00 MARTHA CLARK, LIGHT & DARK** Unusual look at talented dancer/choreographer as she begins to develop her own pieces.
- 10:00 FRONTAL EXPOSURE** Highlights from 1981 SF Art Institute Film Festival. *On the Track* by Lambert Yam; *Untitled* by Karen Barbour; *Obstructions* by Michael Emery; *Ritual* by Andy Anderson; *Untitled* by Bill Yarrington; *Monitoring the Unstable Earth* by Michael Wallin; *Common Loss* by Doug Haynes.

Earthquake McGoon's, 128 The Embarcadero, SF. \$3 cover. 986-1433. (Also Sun/15 and Sun/22.)

★ **Violinist Joseph Gold**, with pianist Johnathan Khuner and soprano Jeanna Wearing, performs works by Senaille, Scarlatti, Mozart, Beethoven, Acterman, Debussy and Sinding. 2 pm, Little Theatre, Palace of the Legion of Honor, Lincoln Park, SF. Free with museum admission (\$1.50).

Bishop Norman Williams performs jazz sax. 2 pm, Noe Valley Ministry, 1021 Sanchez, SF. \$2.50 or PAS.

'**Sunday Matinee**': An afternoon of dance/theater works by Sarah Berges, Evangel King, Katherine Mezur and Edith White. 2:30 pm, Moving Space, 2051 San Pablo, Berk. \$2.50 or PAS. 653-2288.

The Trinity Chamber Orchestra, conducted by Merle Bowen, performs works by J. S. Bach, Milhaud and Mozart. 3 pm, Trinity Chapel, 2320 Dana, Berk. \$5 or PAS + \$2.50.

Folk songs and stories from the Appalachians are performed by Jean Richie. 3 pm, Julia Morgan Center, 2640 College, Berk. \$5, \$4 students and seniors. 548-7234.

Cellist Emmanuel Vacakis, with pianist Kodaly and Brahms. 4 pm, Old First Church, Van Ness and Sacramento, SF. \$3 or PAS + 50¢. 776-1535.

★ **'Zebra Victor's Aural Theatre'** is a sound/poetry performance, the first of a new poetry series every Sun. at the Clarion. 4 pm, Clarion, 2118 Mission (at 17th St.), SF. \$1. 552-4393.

'**Old and New Waves**': The Rhythm Methods perform their dance show, which combines classical and popular dance styles to take a funny (and somewhat jaundiced) view of the past three decades of our popular culture. 5 and 8 pm, The Boarding House, 901 Columbus (at Lombard), SF. \$5. 441-4333. (Every Sun. through the end of March.)

★ **Poetry Reading**: Lynne Danielle and Noni Howard read from their recent works. 8 pm, Earthsign Books, 2510 San Pablo, Berk. \$2. A wine and cheese reception follows.

Mose Allison performs jazz piano. 8 pm, Julia Morgan Center, 2640 College, Berk. \$6. 548-7234.

The Audubon Quartet performs works by Haydn, Mendelssohn and Winslow. 8 pm, Hertz Hall, UC Berk. campus. \$6.50, \$4 students. 642-9988.

'**Previews of Coming Shadows**': An evening of new wave and surrealism featuring Indoor Life, William Talen and four short films. 10 pm, Fab Mab, 443 Broadway, SF. \$3.

The Paddy Noonan . . .: see Fri/6.

SF Ballet: see Fri/6.

'**Gallery Dances**': see Fri/6.

The Bay City Ballet: see Fri/6.

New Sounds San Jose: see Sat/7.

OFFBEAT MOVIES

★ **Birth of Venus** (Rosenbach), **Symbolic Body Language** (Pezold) and **Berlin** (Horn): 4 pm, University Art Museum, UC Berk. campus. Free.

Ceddo: 8 pm, La Pena, 3105 Shattuck, Berk. \$3. 849-2568.

Film Diaries (Guttenplan, 1979-80): 5 short films with the filmmaker in person. 8 pm, Cinematheque, SF Art Institute, 800 Chestnut, SF. \$2.50. 586-8486.

★ **120 TV Commercials**: 6:30 pm, Intersection, 756 Union, SF. \$2. 397-6061.

★ **Poetry Films Using Hypnotic Effects**: 8 pm, Poetry Film Theatre, Bldg. D, Fort Mason, Marina and Buchanan, SF. \$2.

is not a shattering loss. Instead, it's time to clear away the deadwood in your brain and start over. With the Aries moon, you need to lighten up and be more social, especially Aries, Libra, Sagittarius and Aquarius.

★ **The Oakland Museum** is looking for donations of any kind of used objects, which it will sell in its annual White Elephant Sale, to be held in March. If you have anything you can donate (the contributions are tax-deductible), you can arrange to have it picked up by calling 653-0377. For more information about the sale in general, call 893-4257.

★ **Rape Prevention Week**, which will be held in San Francisco sometime before the beginning of July, is now being planned. The Rape Committee of the SF Commission on the Status of Women is holding a meeting on it today; all interested people are welcome to come and contribute ideas. 6 pm, Room 509, 1095 Market (near 7th St.), SF. Free. 558-3653, ask for Jacquie Hale.

Stravinsky and Friends: The SF Chamber Music Society presents many local musicians performing works Stravinsky loved (by Dufay, des Prez, Gesualdo, Debussy and others) and *L'histoire du soldat*. 8 pm, Fireman's Fund Forum, 3333 California, SF. \$6.50, \$2 students. 775-2021.

★ **Barrett Watten**, editor and publisher of *This* magazine and This Press, gives a series of talks titled "Extension." The first, tonight is on "The Politics of Style." 8 pm, Intersection, 756 Union, SF. \$2.

OFFBEAT MOVIES

The Life and Times of Rosie the Riveter (Field, 1980): 8 pm, La Pena, 3105 Shattuck, Berk. \$2.50. 849-2568.

★ **Le Corbeau** ("The Raven") (France — Clouzou, 1943): 7:30 pm, Room 232, Harney Center, Cole and Fulton, SF. \$2, \$1.50 seniors and children.

Saugus Series (O'Neill) with **Monitoring Unstable Earth** (Wallin): 8 pm, Comizery Cafe, Laguna and Hayes, SF. Donation.



Today you can blend your emotional and intellectual natures. You'll be efficient, rea-

sonable and logical. A "live and let live" attitude will dominate the day. This is a time to wait and watch. Most affected will be Taurus, Leo, Scorpio and Aquarius.

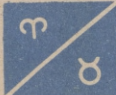
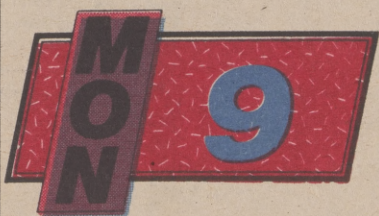
★ **Bobby Seale**, co-founder of the Black Panthers, gives a talk on "The Voice of Black Liberation." Noon, Barbary Coast Room, Student Union, SF State University, 19th Ave. and Holloway, SF. Free.

South African Foreign Policy: Bill Sutherland, the representative to South Africa from the American Friends Service Committee, discusses the possible effects the Reagan administration will have on South Africa policy. 7 pm, World Affairs Center, 312 Sutter, SF. \$3, \$2 World Affairs Council members. 982-2541. Reservations required.

★ **'Twila'**: Jim Bybee's play about a woman who awakens from a long snooze is given a reading by the Playwrights' Center. 7:30 pm, Playwrights' Center, Bldg. C, Fort Mason, Marina and Buchanan, SF. \$1.

★ **'We—The Women'**: A multimedia presentation about the history of women in America, from the first European settlements to the present. 7:30 pm, Women's Bldg., 3543 18th St., SF. Free.

Year-Round Veggies: Pam Peirce teaches a course on how to grow vegetables all year in SF, including the most successful varieties, organic pest control, composting, and more. The course begins tonight and meets each Tues: night for the next four weeks, and there will be one Sat. meeting, which



If some ideas, opinions or feelings are changing, it's time to let them change! Experiences over the past couple months may have proven some of your beliefs and opinions invalid, but this